NYT MON 11 DEC 96

Alger Hiss Is Recalled as a Man of Civility and Sophistication

By JANNY SCOTT

Hundreds of friends and admirers of Alger Hiss gathered yesterday in a church in lower Manhattan, to remember him not as a cause or a symbol but as a man of generosity and wisdom who loved poetry, books, wine and, above all, his many friends.

They came from the seemingly contradictory chapters of his life: the 1930's, when he was a young New Dealer; the mid-1940's, when he was a rising star in the foreign policy establishment and a founder of the United Nations, and the late 1940's, when he was accused of having been a Communist spy.

Others had met him later, after he had spent 44 months in prison for perjury and been disbarred, and was selling stationery for a living. A few had worked on his legal appeals. Some had met him in his old age, when they came to read to him, his health and eyesight failing.

Spy or victimized hero, he is eulogized now as a friend.

"Each of us carries with him or her a set of beliefs about Alger," said Harvey Spear, a lawyer who was one of half a dozen people who spoke during the 90-minute memorial service at St. George's Episcopal Church on Stuyvesant Square. "Everyone knew his name. Unfortunately, too few knew his qualities."

Mr. Hiss, whose case became a flashpoint for debate during the cold war and brought Richard M. Nixon to national attention, died in New York City on Nov. 15. He had spent nearly 50 years insisting that he was innocent. Followers of the case remain deeply divided over the question of his guilt.

"One of the consequences was that for most people in the world, Alger ceased to exist as an individual," said Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College, who first came to know Mr. Hiss during the 1960's. Instead of an individual, Mr. Botstein said, Mr. Hiss became a symbol or a cause.

Though most speakers addressed themselves to what they described as Mr. Hiss's virtues as a man and a friend, a few alluded to the case, some to suggest that vindication was inevitable, others to regret that it had not come before Mr. Hiss had died.

"This is particularly difficult, because for an important part of Alger's life there is no satisfactory closure, since what he had hoped for in his lifetime was vindication from his own government," said John Lowenthal, a retired law professor who said he had known Mr. Hiss for 67 years.

Mr. Lowenthal, who made a documentary film in 1980 about the Hiss case, suggested that Mr. Hiss's supporters would continue to work "to repair the record and his public reputation."

He added: "Among his friends, he does not need any more."

Speakers recalled Mr. Hiss as a man of dignity and culture, a lover of Shakespeare who was fascinated by history, who once asked to be read a book on the military tactics of Alexander the Great and rejected "The Arabian Nights" in favor of "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire."

Mr. Lowenthal said Mr. Hiss had introduced him to poetry and that they had gone on to read together all of Shakespeare's sonnets, then the entire Norton Anthology of English Literature, with detours to the encyclopedia and to a historical novel about chivalry, and finally Boswell's "Life of Samuel Johnson."

Others described Mr. Hiss as strangely without bitterness, a person who, as Mr. Botstein put it, retained "an abiding faith in civility, rational argument and respect for law." Several invoked Mr. Hiss's belief, stated in his memoir, that the way one travels through life matters more than what one achieves.

"As we all know, Alger expended almost 50 years of his extraordinary talents selling stationery and seeking vindication," Mr. Lowenthal said. "But let's not bemoan it. It left more time for us to be his friends."